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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a course on "Psychology of Women" taught by the author at Southern Illinois University. It outlines ways in which such a course may function as a consciousness-raising group, giving women a chance to explore and share their common experiences. The author, an avowed feminist, made her values clear from the beginning. She felt it important to involve students in teaching as well as learning, and introduced them to statistical techniques so they could evaluate material for themselves. Successful class assignments included keeping a log of reactions to readings, and interviewing another woman of a different "life space" (age, race, social class). The importance of dealing with the problems of minority women in such a course is also discussed. Student reactions as described in the article were highly favorable. (BP)

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The Psychology of Women Course as A Consciousness-Raising Technique

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The consciousness-raising experience has been at the heart of the Women's Liberation Movement from the very beginning. CR has given women a vehicle for sharing their experiences, for gaining validation and support for themselves and their feelings. CR has provided a data base in the oral tradition, a meeting place where women have found that they were not alone in their hopes, fears, fantasies, and reactions to being a woman in America. CR has served to make women more aware; of themselves, of their oppression as women, and of the ways this oppression has operationalized in their daily lives.

But for a variety of reasons, the experience of the consciousness-raising group i.e., leaderless groups of women sharing experiences on an informal basis, doesn't meet the needs of all those who could benefit from the experience. Some women, although embracing certain demands of the women's movement, i.e., equal pay and job equality, feel that joining a CR group is too emotionally threatening a step. Their current lifestyles or their own fears of personal change combine to keep them out of groups, and often out of close contact with women who have experienced CR and could help ease their way into change. Some women (and men) are basically uncomfortable with the group experience; they are unwilling and/or unready to be self-disclosing and emotionally intimate with others. And some women, not seeing that feminism has anything to do with their lives, disclaim interest,

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or may express disdain for the idea of consciousness-raising.

It is for these groups of people, who would not ordinarily come into contact with CR, that a course in the Psychology of Women, taught by a feminist from a feminist perspective, can serve as a highly effective means of affecting awareness. Such a course offers its students a non-threatening, data-oriented experience in which, through reading about women, sharing in class discussions, and observation of the lives of women, students can become more aware of the impact of sexism on their lives, and those of other women. What I'd like to discuss here are some of the experiences that I and two other women have had in teaching Psychology of Women courses at SIU. Specifically, I'd like to examine the ways in which, overtly and covertly, the class experience raised the consciousnessess of both students and instructors.

From the beginning, it was important to let students know that I was a feminist, and to discuss with them how that would affect the process of the class. I felt it was important to make students aware that I had a bias, and that neither I, nor any instructor, teaches a totally value-free course. I also felt the need for providing a role-model and contact with feminism for my students, many of whose views of feminism reflect the popular media distortion of the women's movement. And for those women in the class who were already feminists, I wanted to join in validation of their views. I don't think that being a feminist is something to hide, either; and because it did affect the material I chose to read, and the way I structured the class, I wanted to bring my politics and their effects on my teaching into the open.

Because I am a feminist, I tried to make the course an experience in a feminist way of doing things. Sharon Lord of the University of Tennessee, in a paper entitled, "Down with Classroom Patriarchy", has delineated and made explicit some of the implicit assumptions that I took with me to teaching this

class, and which I feel are important in creating a consciousness-raising experience in the class. The most important initial assumption for me was that I as instructor did not have a premium on knowledge; I was not a "Big pitcher" pouring out my wisom into "little pitchers" all the time. Although some of this kind of learning did take place, I made an effort to get students to contribute to the learning of all of us; I solicited and encouraged class participation, additions or corrections to my input, and disagreements when they were felt. Thus, the class (and I) learned a lot about the effects of hormone changes on women athletes, courtesy of a student who was studying to be a coach; another student who worked as an abortion counselor at the local Women's Center talked about her experiences in her work, and expanded all of our horizons.

I also made the assumption that, given the tools, students were as capable of reading and critically analyzing the course material as I was, and could then make the choice of how to integrate the information learned. Hence, the first week of the class was devoted to teaching students about statistical techniques, reading tables, and in general, to learning how to distinguish between what the authors found and what they said their findings meant. The issue of author bias was discussed. The real meaning and use of the "significant difference" term were gone over. The result was, that by a few weeks into the semester, students were able to see for themselves where an article's report of significant differences ignored a more important overlap of scores, or how an author, in the discussion section, would give undue weight to trends that had little statistical meaning. Teaching students these tools meant that they weren't dependent on me to tell them what was being said about the psychology of women. Students could evaluate the data and were free to draw their own conclusions.

Another very important assumption of this course was that it was a

study of Women, and not of sex differences. Several texts have appeared on the market recently that try to stress that they are not "narrowly" studying only women; I find this view of women's psychology incompatible with the course as a CR experience. I wanted to emphasize, through the choice of what we studied and the focus of class discussion, the importance of studying women. Thus, while not ignoring the fact that women do not exist in a vacuum, the focus of class energy and time was on the psychology of women, not sex differences or sex roles, which were often subsumed under the central topic. This was a new experience for the students, and I believe impacts on the way they see their own importance as women.

A third technique aimed specifically at raising awareness was the explicit provision of class time for discussion and integration of material covered in the course. Students were encouraged to discuss what they had learned in the light of their own lives and experiences, or of those of women they were close to. The reading material gave class participants a safe entry into sharing their experiences in ways that often differed little from the personal sharing found in CR groups. And the groups provided an arena where women learned that their experiences were valid and valuable, learned that they were not alone in their reactions to their lives, were able to share their joy or shock or anger about the data they had taken from the readings.

Reemphasizing the validity of the individual woman's experience as a way of studying women were two class assignments; a log of reactions to readings, and an interview of another woman. The log was a chance for the students to practice their skills of critical analysis by examining specific readings to see whether the author was supporting her arguments in a valid and honest manner; it was also a chance for the students to write about the ways in which the material of the reading related to their own lives. I found that some of those students who were more reticent in sharing in the

discussion groups opened up in the logs, and began to get a sense of the ways in which their being a woman affected their daily lives. One woman, after reading an article on the nonconscious ideology of sexism, flashed on a camping trip where she and the other women had, as a matter of course, done all the cooking and cleaning up; her "aha" experience led to a conscious effort on her part to see that the work was evenly shared the next weekend! The interview was an even more impactful assignment; women were asked to interview another woman, who was in a different life-space (different age, race, social class, job status), about her life as a woman. Interview guidelines gave the students permission to ask other women about how and if they had been treated differently because of their sex; how they had experienced and learned about their sexuality, how they had made the choices for their particular lifestyle. The student feedback on this work was overwhelmingly positive, and gave indications of the ways in which this assignment had been a consciousness-raising experience. Many students interviewed their mothers, and felt a sense of increased closeness; one woman went out and interviewed all her friends, finding that, with the interview as an opener, she could get to know them, and they her, in ways that hadn't been previously available. Most students reported that the interview had been a two-way sharing, the kind of intimate conversation with another woman that was an uncommon experience in their lives. The interview created a two-woman CR group, if only for a short time, for the women in the class.

Finally, the material of the lectures and readings was picked with an eye to raising students' awareness. The main texts for the course were both feminist in their outlook; one, Our Bodies Our Selves was perceived by many of the students as a kind of "biblio-CR", with lots of joyous responses of the personal experiences of women that are incorporated into that book. Some material was included that was meant to motivate a "click" experience; we

read Freud, Erikson on women in the original, and it is surprising just how willing students are to question authority after they have seen psychological authorities fall flat on their faces about women. I found that the task of teaching critical analysis was easier once students had seen for themselves some of the more blatant misdirections that have been taken in the study of women's behavior by the so-called experts. Much course material was chosen to relate specifically to women's lives; research on women and success turned into a personal project on the part of one student to start attributing her successes to herself, and not to luck. Studies on women and hormonal cycles sent a group of students to plotting their own mood and energy changes over the month. And after a lecture on sexual anatomy and the self-help movement, the barrage of requests from students in the course for their own speculums led to a change in the policy of the SIU Health Service, which now gives them out on request. The message of the material was that the women in the class were who were being talked about, and that if they wanted to, they could take the insights from the data and use them to change their own lives; and many did. And when the weight of evidence seemed to leave unanswered questions, the students in the course began to see that they had the powers to get at the answers; several independent research projects resulted from students in the class being turned-on by an unresolved idea.

In evaluations completed at midterm and the end of the semester, students in both of the years that Psychology of Women has been taught at SIU were asked if and how the experience of the class had changed their awareness of themselves, and of the operations of sex-roles in our culture. Many of the students reported great changes in the way they saw women and men; they reported changes in their own lives, in their interactions with partners and friends, with their families and with children (the chain of people who have read the story of "Baby X", the androgynous baby, after it was assigned

in class got ridiculously long; one student gave it to her P.E. instructor who passed it on to a male student of hers who coached in a small Southern Illinois town who passed it on to other faculty and his students, and there I lost that trail). Several students reported that the class had served as an impetus for them to join consciousness-raising groups; one woman remarked that she had so much enjoyed the sharing in the discussion groups and the personal experiences in the reading material that she knew she wouldn't want to give it up when the semester was over, so she joined a CR group to keep her good feelings about being a woman going. All students reported an increased awareness of their own behavior in terms of sex roles, and many commented that this awareness had given them the freedom of movement to initiate changes in their lives. Students reported that especially important to them was the material that, in other forms, serves as the focus of many CR groups; sexuality, achievement, marriage and lifestyles, socialization. And I found that my consciousness was raised, too; by teaching the course, I encountered women I would have never met otherwise; rural women, women athletes, Christian feminists, women from realities not my own. Because of my students, I, too, grew.

In summary, our experience at SIU, and the experiences of other women teaching Psychology of Women courses, leaves a trail of anecdotal evidence suggesting that such a course, and the information about women's behavior that it conveys, can be a powerful tool for effecting changes in the ways women see themselves. As with the CR group, the Psychology of Women course provides a medium for women to learn that they are not alone in their experiences. I see that information about fear of success, or the effect of hormones on mood, or women's assertive rights is just as consciousness raising as hearing a sister share her latest experience with her sexist boss; testimony in CR is most often personal, yet it is equally valid and impactful

for some women when it comes from a book. For those women who come into a Psychology of Women class curious but fearful about feminism, and more likely to believe what they read than the personal experiences of themselves and other women, the course is a radicalizing experience; they discover that feminism isn't scary, that it applies to their lives, and not only to those of media-image feminists. They find out that their experiences and lives are just as good, if not better sources of material, than much of what was written on women by the male "authorities."

A word seems due here on the male student in the Psychology of Women class. Few men here have signed up for the course; of those who do, the majority are committed already to supporting feminism, and to examining sexism in their own lives. But for the few outright committed sexists who show up in every class determined to do battle, the class is a positive instrument of change; out of whatever crazy motives, these men have brought themselves into contact with feminism, and arguments for equality that are based in reality and research as well as theory.

I also feel a need to talk about the importance of dealing with the psychology of minority women in a Psychology of Women course. Most of the research on women deals poorly or not at all with Black and other minority women; many of us teaching Psychology of Women courses are equally ignorant, or may feel, as I do, that I lack personal experience to be able to teach about this topic. There is no better way of demonstrating the feminist ethic of collective work than an instructor's willingness to become involved either with students, or other women who are knowledgeable, in the teaching at this point.

In fact, I feel it is important to stress that, if an instructor is trying to cover a topic area where she is unfamiliar or uncomfortable, she needs to bring in the cooperation of other women who are knowledgable.

Sharon Lord's suggestions about teaching a Psychology of Women course refer specifically to the importance of giving good information about women's sexuality; if you aren't knowledgable or comfortable in this topic area, find someone who is to work with you. In my case, I have little interest or expertise in the area of women and vocational choices; so that unit was taught by a feminist who has been working with the career placement service for several years, and who knows about and is interested in the area; interested enough to convey her enthusiasm to students. I don't think that the class would have seen as much of CR experience if I and the other women doing teaching had not been enthused and positive about what we were teaching; thus, I see boredom with the topic as detrimental to the impact the course has on its students.

I'd like to finish by sharing my perception of the power and impact of a Psychology of Women course on the lives of its participants. I keep in close touch with many of the students in my class; from them, I get feedback that they have continued to grow and the change in their lives. And, they are now feeling equipped with the data to support their views; they know they are not alone, and are more willing to work for changes in society that will affect the lives and behavior of women. One telling comment comes from a man in the first year of the class; he wrote to us to tell us that, because of the class, he learned to see women as individuals and people, and to be aware of how he related to them. He said that he now had women as friends, and felt in a better place to empathize with their experience. And he had a new definition of himself as a man; he, too, could be what he wanted to be (which translated that he finally went ahead and got his ear pierced after thinking about it for two years but fearing it "unmanliness"). A course in the Psychology of Women is one road that we as psychologists and feminists can take to raising the consciousnesses of others around us.